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Penn State Football: An Analysis of Crisis Communication Best Practices and How PSU Overcame the Ultimate PR Crisis

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
December 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Public Relations

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Abstract

This thesis paper is an analysis of the crisis communication response to the 2011 Pennsylvania State University child sex abuse scandal. The reputation of this iconic university and its football program was changed forever by this horrific event, which involved years of administrative cover-ups of the sexual assault of children by an assistant football coach. However, despite widespread public backlash, administrative upheaval and heavy NCAA sanctions in the months after the scandal broke, Penn State has since made major strides in image improvement.

This project delves into what defines best crisis communication practices, using Penn State as a case study. While much of what the university did falls into the “what not to do” category, there is a lot to be learned from its actions. The purpose of this thesis is to look at what went right, what went wrong, and why, taking a deeper look at a large-scale public relations crisis in the context of the complex world of college athletics.

My research begins with a literature review of best practices for dealing with crises in terms of communications. Background research of the institution and the scandal itself through news coverage and various literature, including a biography on legendary PSU coach Joe Paterno, provided the foundation for a situation analysis. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the crisis situation were then laid out. Next came a communications audit of the way Penn State responded in the midst of a highly publicized scandal and an analysis of the administrative response to the situation, from firing and hiring to how the current (at the time) football team dealt with the situation. The final phase of research involved creating an evaluation of Penn State’s actions, along with recommendations for practitioners addressing college football crises in the future.

Executive Summary

This study aims to explore and analyze Penn State's crisis response after the shocking Jerry Sandusky scandal and cover-up came to light in 2011 and 2012. In November 2011, former PSU football defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky was arrested and later charged with 45 counts related to the sexual abuse of young boys over an extensive period from 1994-2009. Much of the abuse allegedly took place in State College, PA at the football facility on Penn State's campus. A grand jury investigation and later independent investigation headed by former FBI director Louis Freeh showed the involvement of PSU president Graham Spanier, athletic director Tim Curley, administrator Gary Schultz and revered longtime head football coach Joe Paterno in covering up Sandusky's actions and failing to properly report him to the authorities. This scandal rocked a "big-time" college football program and well-known, widely respected university to its core, resulting in major media scrutiny and lost public trust. Despite this, just three years later, Penn State has bounced back due to a number of factors, including its loyal fan base, savvy administrative personnel and policy changes, and perhaps certain reactionary avenues it explored in responding to crisis.

To examine this crisis in full, this thesis begins with a review of crisis communication best practices and suggested tactics before delving into Penn State as a case study. Then, context and background to inform the reader on the notoriously rampant culture of Penn State Football, along with an explanation of the details of the scandal, is provided. Armed with this knowledge, the reader then delves into an analysis of how Penn State reacted as an institution, through a communications audit and study of its efforts. Finally, these efforts are crosschecked with best practices in crisis communications, in order to see where Penn State went wrong and how they still overcame a crisis of this magnitude despite some early missteps. The thesis ends with

suggested recommendations for future college football crises based on the lessons learned from Penn State and the incorporation of best practice methods.

Crisis management is a reactionary art that benefits strongly from proactive planning and scanning. While traditional public relations involves seeking publicity to garner brand recognition, build trust and create a positive image, crisis communications involves the crafting of targeted messages to respond to a problem in the public eye with the ultimate goal of alleviating public turmoil and rebuilding public trust (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 1). Experts suggest exercising such principles as honesty, compassion and confidence in crafting a crisis response – especially one where there are angry or hurt publics, as was the case with Penn State. Key elements of crisis response include choosing the right spokesperson, remaining transparent on all platforms – including social media, making frequent updates and disseminating consistent messages that align the organization with its core values in order to repair its relationship with its publics.

Penn State football is one of the most popular programs in the country, and Joe Paterno reigned as “king” on Penn State’s campus as head football coach for 45 years, becoming the winningest coach in college football (though due to his role in this scandal over 100 wins were later vacated). PSU football has been called the “central fact of life in the state” due to its prevalence in the hearts and minds of so many Nittany Lion faithful (Vecsey, 2011). While this environment of “football as king” set the stage for an unprecedented crisis due to a series of serious administrative missteps and lack of ethical decision-making by those in power – in essence, placing football over everything proved to be detrimental – it also provided Penn State with massive potential for trust rebuilding and support in the post-crisis phase. The school did a poor job of realizing this potential from the start, and a lackadaisical initial crisis response put

the program and school in an even worse position than it found itself when the crisis broke. Still, three years later, Penn State has made considerable progress as an institution and Penn State football has moved forward as a sports entity despite the major bruises it endured from this scandal.

Then-president Graham Spanier and legendary head football coach Joe Paterno – two of the most powerful people at Penn State – were wrapped up in the scandal, making crisis response even more difficult for Penn State than if Sandusky had been the sole cause of the problem. The stale taste of such an abominable cover-up was worsened with Penn State's slow response, and Spanier's initial statement addressing the crisis misplaced trust in the very administrators who were later charged with perjury for their roles in the scandal. Four days later, once the board of trustees made the decision to oust these top administrators including Spanier, Curley, Schultz and Paterno, Penn State began to make better crisis management decisions. The damage done seemed irreparable, but policy changes and a continued commitment to addressing the crisis – especially through hiring Louis Freeh, former FBI director, to carry out an independent investigation – showed good management decisions that were swiftly communicated to the public.

Though it was punished severely by the NCAA with multiple sanctions and fines, Penn State stuck together as a football program and made a move forward into a new era after Paterno's firing and death with the hire of head coach Bill O'Brien. Today, Penn State is led by a new chapter of leaders, once removed from the post-scandal era. Though this scandal will never be forgotten, Penn State was able to survive an unprecedented crisis by turning its act around and eventually distancing itself from those who brought it down. Painful memories and distrust in the minds of many will endure for a long time, but Penn State has clearly made progress in a

relatively short time – three years – that shows how a big-time college football program is able to move forward from a major black eye thanks to immense brand loyalty and targeted moves.

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Preface

As a public relations major with a strong interest in sport management and administration, I was fascinated by the way Penn State handled the unprecedented public relations disaster that resulted from allegations of a university cover-up of ongoing child sexual abuse by assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky. I am a voracious college football fan, and to see the arguably one of the most legendary programs of all time be at the head of such a horrific turn of events, shaking the complex world of college athletics to its core, was something that led me to examine the situation further, specifically from the perspective of the public relations crisis at hand. How would the university, and specifically, its historic football program, bounce back from such a disastrous image-destroying predicament with far-reaching legal and ethical implications? Did Penn State's reaction to this crisis set a worthy precedent for future college football programs enduring controversial image crises? This thesis will critically examine the steps Penn State took to address the crisis, analyzing how effective its reaction was. It will also explore the consequences of PSU's actions in terms of public reception, and finally will include recommendations for a better handling of this crisis and suggestions for future crisis communication procedures in college football.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family, friends and professors for their support and encouragement throughout my college career. This project would not have come to fruition without the help of Professor Dennis Kinsey and Professor Patrick Ryan – I sincerely thank you both. Thank you to the Renée Crown University Honors Program for pushing me to explore new avenues in my education and allowing me to shape my experience at Syracuse University and hone my critical thinking skills with a challenging and inspiring curriculum. Now... onto law school!

Advice to Future Honors Students

My advice for honors students is to think about what truly captivates and excites you. Pick a topic that you are interested in, and get to know it inside and out. Also, don't wait until the last minute – especially if you are a December graduate! I speak from experience when I reiterate the saying that “the best way to get something done is to begin.” And in the words of Nelson Mandela: “It always seems impossible until it's done.” Get excited, and get moving. Also, enjoy the process! The end of your college career is bittersweet, so soak up every moment – even late nights typing away on your computer with coffee in hand. This project will challenge you, but it will ultimately reward you. Don't give up.

Chapter 1: Crisis Communication Best Practices

Defining a Crisis

In the words of Nobel Peace Prize recipient and former Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger, “an issue ignored is a crisis invited” (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 1). Historically, pushing problems aside and refusing to confront them as they arise only results in a buildup of negative issues that ultimately boil over into a full-blown crisis. As this thesis will later address, the Penn State child sex abuse scandal did exactly that – what began as a severe and horrible problem, initiated by one man, grew into years of lies, administrative cover-ups and a widespread lack of accountability. This resulted in many children’s emotional and physical harm as well as a major character and image crisis for a widely respected, nationally recognized and government-funded institution.

Strategic communications expert Jane Jordan-Meier describes the root of most corporate crises as a company’s doing “something wrong, illegal, unethical, or immoral and [trying] to hide it” (2011, ch. 1). She explains that all crises are incited by triggering events, whether by disgruntled employees speaking out or through the media’s exposure of an issue that has been swept under the rug – known as a “smoldering issue” (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 1). Classic examples of such issues include the Toyota vehicle recall crisis of 2010 or the BP oil disaster; each of these situations involved cover-ups, as administrators failed to effectively address the problems at hand, resulting in major consequences including lost lives and extreme environmental damage (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 1).

Crisis management, in the eyes of industry veteran Jonathan Bernstein, is considered “the art of avoiding trouble when you can, and reacting appropriately when you can’t” (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 1). He says it is an art, not a science, because no single clear-cut formula can be applied to all crises to ensure an effective solution (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 1). Crisis

management differs from traditional public relations in the sense that it is reactive, as opposed to proactive, and deals with media exposure in a threatening environment; this results in targeted messages designed to address a problem, rather than seeking publicity to simply increase brand recognition and build one's image (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 1). To use a football metaphor, public relations is the offense, while crisis management is the defense. One can build upon a positive image, scoring touchdown after touchdown with relevant media coverage of events and initiatives, but all it takes is a single, devastating turnover – a crisis – to turn the game around and put the organization in a defensive position as it works desperately to protect what remains of its image and good name while re-building the public's trust it has lost, all under the blinding spotlight of the (oftentimes national) media.

Crisis Coverage in the Media

Crisis communications consultant Jeff Ansell, who has helped Fortune 500 companies manage high-profile crises, and author Jeffrey Leeson explain that now more than ever before, the public holds companies and institutions accountable to be “genuine and trustworthy” (2010, ch. 1). The Edelman Trust Barometer shows continually decreasing public trust in corporate leaders in the United States, especially when they are seen as spokespeople in the media (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 1). This is due to not only the unethical actions and decisions of corporate leaders, but the words that create the illusion of a shallow, broken record when addressing the media in times of crisis:

“The current model for media training is broken because it calls on spokespeople to ignore questions and repeat “key” messages. Each time a nonresponsive message is repeated, a layer of credibility is stripped away from the speaker” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 1).

With the advent of social media, public backlash and outcry now spreads like wildfire; Twitter, for example, is not only a vehicle for citizen journalists, but also a speedy, real-time

platform for traditional media outlets to disseminate breaking news (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 2). One of the most challenging aspects of crisis communication is the lack of control practitioners have over these media outlets. Jordan-Meier insists that in the midst of a crisis, communication – in terms of coverage by news media – shapes the public’s opinion, determining “how communities act, think, and feel about an organization’s reputation, its values, and its actions” (2011, ch. 2). She stresses the importance of managing media and staying in the conversation in times of crisis, explaining the news’ malleability as a participatory, two-way street driven by our conversations, opinions and reactions (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 3). And while social media plays a major role – a 2010 study showed 61 percent of Americans get at least some of their news online – traditional mainstream media outlets are still powerful, as 78 percent of Americans get their news from local TV stations, 73 percent from cable stations like CNN or Fox and 50 percent from local newspapers (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 3). Jordan-Meier says that despite these high figures, relying on traditional media outlets as the sole way to reach an audience means practitioners could miss much of their audience and fail at getting the full story out, as the one-to-three-minute segments that comprise local TV news stories are too short to tell the whole story (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 3). She further insists, “you will need more than the traditional media release and news conference to get your message out quickly to all the affected stakeholders. Simple fact: You need social media to help you reach them—and fast” (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 3). The news media’s ultimate goal as truth-seekers is described by Jordan-Meier as:

“The media feel it is their duty to serve society during a crisis. But never underestimate the basic motivation of most journalists in a crisis—to get to the bottom of an issue, a crisis, and find out what *really* happened and *who* has responsibility and can be blamed... So, you can expect journalists to be dogged in their search for the truth, particularly if they think there has been wrongdoing. They will work (on society's behalf) to expose and investigate abuses of power and protect the public's health and safety in as many ways as they can, and sometimes this may lead to overexposure of the horror that they have witnessed firsthand” (2011, ch. 5).

The Stages of a Crisis

The four stages of a crisis include (1) the breaking news stage, (2) the unfolding drama stage, (3) the blame game stage and (4) the resolution and fallout stage (Jordan-Meier, 2012). In the first stage, the media, and thus, audience, focus on the incident itself – who, what, when and where the event happened (Jordan-Meier, 2012). This is the initial phase of the crisis, where communicators must gauge the impact and degree of the crisis event – we must “pick the panic” and determine the immediate concerns for the organization, what people want to know and where they will go to find this information (Jordan-Meier, 2012). The importance of monitoring developments on a 24/7 basis during this phase is imperative; “communicators need to stay one step ahead of the story” when dealing with a crisis from an internal perspective (Jordan-Meier, 2012). Executing a comprehensive crisis plan is paramount to succeeding at this early stage – collect facts, dispel rumors, decide on a key message and stick to it, and call in external support to help better deal with the issue at hand (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 7).

The “unfolding drama” stage begins soon after the news breaks; this is dubbed the “how” stage – when public interest and opinion shifts from the surface details of the incident to the deeper implications – the victims, the response by the organization and asking why the event happened in the first place (Jordan-Meier, 2012). Jordan-Meier describes this as the “make-it-or-break-it, reputation-forming stage” (2012, ch. 9). Journalists often link stories back to previous events as they begin to “dig for dirt” and uncover the full truth; this is also the stage where social media responses gain traction (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 9). Quick, open and honest responses acknowledging the wrongdoing at hand allows an organization to avoid some of the “blame game” effects that follow in stage three (Jordan-Meier, 2012). This response – including an apology – must be made by a deliberately chosen spokesperson who puts a face to the

organization during this critical time of public judgment (Jordan-Meier, 2012). Jordan-Meier explains the need for “speed, decisiveness, authority—and often significant courage” in times of crisis:

“It does take courage to step out of the "safe" business mode and step into the public arena. Not only do you need to demonstrate compassion for the "victims," but you need to convey strong conviction for the actions you are taking” (2011, ch. 14).

She describes the “grace-under-fire test” that spokespeople experience in addressing the media, and the importance of choosing the right person for the job (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 14). The “classic spokesperson approach” involves choosing a senior-level leader who not only recognizes the true concerns of the situation but is prepared, trained and shows a human side (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 15). The role of the apology in this phase is key, and consists of five parts: act quickly, be specific and honest, give heartfelt remorse, shut up and listen, and make it right (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 26). Language choices are also a major factor:

“The challenge in any situation, and particularly in a crisis, is to get your message across succinctly, effectively, and efficiently. While the traditional media have the final say in what is printed or broadcast, you can *influence* the results because public audiences aggregate, share, and tweet what you say and how you say it. The key is to be *quotable and memorable, and to use simple, plain English*” (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 28).

While the tenets of crafting an effective crisis response message seem simple, sticking to the basics has proven to be the best way to get the message across, sans jargon and vague, sweeping statements. Keeping sentences short and direct, using simple words and avoiding qualifiers and the word “but” will allow the message to remain clear (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 4). In addressing the public during a crisis, spokespeople must exhibit the “three C’s of credibility:” compassion, competence and confidence (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 6). The tone of the response is critical in shaping public perception of the organization; from the moment the crisis or controversy arises, having a sense of how you want to be perceived by the public

will help determine the course of action (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). To expert Jeff Ansell, “there is much to be gained by projecting an image of openness, honesty, and empathy” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). To do this, he asks clients a key question: “Money aside and lawyers aside, what’s the right thing to do?” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). By staying true to the character tenets of honesty and justice – in essence, using one’s “value compass” (explained in the next section) for guidance – organizational credibility and trust can be regained even in the ugliest of crises (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). It is essential to put a face to the greater organization, and that spokesperson must be sincere in conveying the organizational response, and cannot simply defer to facts or figures in an attempt to defend the actions causing the crisis (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). Rather, by appealing to the emotions of the public that are the foundation of their outrage at the crisis, the spokesperson can set the organization off on the right foot to an empathetic, action-driven resolution (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3).

As the initial shock of the crisis starts to settle, the “how” moves to “why” as people look to point fingers (Jordan-Meier, 2012). Here, it is important to highlight the steps the organization is taking to ensure that mistakes like this will not happen again (Jordan-Meier, 2012).

Practitioners may consider joining a conversation with critics, addressing the crisis head-on in a strategic way; this allows the organization to maintain some control and drive the strategy, thus contributing to the shaping of public opinion (Jordan-Meier, 2012). Legal implications can complicate what an organization is ‘allowed’ to say in the midst of a crisis, but saying nothing is usually not the solution. The court of public opinion is an extremely receptive one, and by giving it nothing to work with, an organization misses a chance to educate and thereby set the story straight (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 10). Bernstein insists that “no communication is

communication,” and by staying silent due to fear or an attorney’s advice, an organization can dig itself into a deeper hole (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 10). He further states:

“Failing to communicate during a crisis is, in the eyes of the public, an admission of guilt. In the majority of cases (unless the evidence is demonstrably otherwise), the public generally suspends forming a judgment until it has heard enough information to do so. If your organization remains silent, you essentially pass up the opportunity to speak to the public when it’s at its most receptive. Point this out to your organization’s decision makers. Remind them that in this instance silence is not golden” (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 10).

Of course, responding to a crisis in the public eye while under official investigation presents its own challenges. Bernstein’s recommendations for handling this situation include practicing transparency, providing access, cooperating with officials and exerting a public image of confidence (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 15).

The final stage of a crisis occurs when the dust truly starts to settle – the organization recognizes the “lessons learned” from the crisis and acknowledges its transition – be it ‘back to normal’ in terms of putting a product back on the shelf or, in the case of PSU, moving on to a new phase where the organization strives to do better and be a stronger, more responsible institution (Jordan-Meier, 2012). Monitoring public opinion and being active during this final stage is crucial to ensuring the crisis does not take on a new life of its own; practitioners must not only communicate solutions to the public, but also take action (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 11).

Demonstrating solutions, rebuilding relationships and showing continued empathy toward the victims, all while monitoring media coverage, are the first steps to reaching that ‘new normal’ in a post-crisis environment (Jordan-Meier, 2011, ch. 11). Recovering the losses and repairing the damage done by a crisis can be a tall task, and must be done continually over time (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 8). Doing an honest appraisal of the damage allows an organization to gauge what internal areas need improvement, as public relations is only one function of a crisis

(Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 8). Conducting a post-crisis analysis is key, as the PR team can determine the strengths and weaknesses of its actions and learn from its mistakes while proactively preparing for any future crises (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 8). Part of this includes conducting a “vulnerability audit,” which involves an organization scanning for other potential crises and determining what its weaknesses are that could result in problems down the road (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 8). Creating a plan and being ahead of the curve allows organizations to be ready the next time a controversy strikes, and preparedness is half the battle.

The Value Compass

Jeff Ansell uses a tool called the value compass (Figure 1.1) in dealing with “public battles and situations that are unlikely to be won in the court of public opinion” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). This incorporates the spokesperson’s nature and standards while taking into account the stakeholders’ emotion and well-being – all key elements to consider when publicly responding to controversy that is plainly seen as wrong and inexcusable (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). Charting out a value compass allows an organization to acknowledge the tone and perception it wants to create for itself, while recognizing the emotions of its stakeholders and the consequences and effects of its actions on said stakeholders. First, a practitioner must consider who the stakeholders are in the crisis situation. Then, determine words to describe the nature of the organization, which will be conveyed through the spokesperson, in the context of the situation (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). For example, “honest, humble and sincere” were the words chosen by Ansell’s client to shape the nature of addressing a tax evasion crisis. Next, the standards which the organization wants to live up to and project to the public in its crisis response are identified (for example, “accountable, credible and truthful” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). Then the stakeholders’ emotions are identified (e.g. anger, contempt and disgust),

along with the steps to take to promote their well-being (e.g. action, apologize and responsiveness) (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). Finally, the most important element from each of these four lists is written to form a comprehensive “NEWS” – Nature, Emotions, Well-being, Standards – filter to be used in molding messages to the media and public (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). Ansell’s example of a NEWS filter includes “honest, anger, responsiveness and accountable” as the four tenets to remember when crafting a response to a crisis – being truthful, recognizing the public’s anger, responding to said anger through action and being held accountable to specific standards of credibility and ethics will ensure the best possible response to an agitated and outraged audience (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 2). While it is a simple concept, the idea of the value compass could go far in helping an organization to stay true to itself in times of extreme crisis. By acknowledging who its stakeholders are and how they are reacting, along with determining what perception it wants these stakeholders to receive from its course of action, an organization can go about crafting its crisis response messages with an ear to the ground, never losing sight of who it strives to reach, how to do it and why. Identifying and sticking to organizational values is crucial in times of crisis, as an organization will be tested by the untrusting public and must communicate the way in which it strives to be – and *do* – better before regaining public trust.

Regaining Lost Public Trust

Jeff Ansell identifies a Washington University research study that states there are two types of trust violations: a breach of integrity, like an athlete’s steroid use or politician’s extramarital affair, or a lack of competency that reflects the organizations’ abilities and knowledge (or lack thereof), like an airline’s pattern of delays or a medical malpractice suit (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). Interestingly enough, the study showed that denying integrity-

based allegations works best, because it is extremely difficult to bounce back from the label of “liar” or “thief” in the public eye (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). In the case of competency-based offenses, a clear apology and explanation of why it will not happen again was identified as the best plan of action (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). Ansell identifies four guiding principles to “help build trust and ensure that comments are not interpreted as dishonest or dismissive” when interacting with the media during a public relations crisis:

- Show humility.
 - Answer honestly.
 - Acknowledge skepticism.
 - Couple concern with commitment to action.
- (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3)

Conveying a balance of confidence and humility allows an organization to avoid being perceived as cocky or insensitive, while also preventing it from being seen as weak (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). Being honest, especially in addressing a crisis that stems from a pattern of dishonesty and deceit, is a fundamental element of crisis response. Ansell states, “when executives and spokespeople shy away from being honest, the truth has a way of catching up with them. Not being honest or not coming across as honest makes a spokesperson look and sound evasive and untrustworthy” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). The third principle, acknowledging skepticism, is a way to legitimize the public’s concern, as it enhances credibility and shows that the organization itself is not shying away from the painful truth (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). Ansell uses the example of the Catholic Church’s sex abuse scandal to demonstrate this idea, as Father James Flavin of Boston acted as a voice for priests who were outraged by the cover-up, saying, “I wouldn’t trust other priests right now, either” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). This showed that the priest himself was on the same page as the public in terms of concern, and that he realized the gravity of the situation and was not opposed to

addressing it head-on despite his position as a leader within the institution undergoing the crisis. While showing concern is the first step, pairing it with a commitment to further action will ensure the public that change will actually be incited and similar mistakes will not happen again. As Ansell expresses, “concern without action is meaningless rhetoric” (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). Speculation is not a substitute for this; empty promises will only aggravate the already upset stakeholders (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3). To avoid speculation, Ansell recommends sticking to the values set forth in an organization’s value compass – for example, remaining empathetic and promising further action, like research and bringing in experts to determine ways to alleviate the problem, can go a long way (Ansell & Leeson, 2010, ch. 3).

Bernstein similarly identifies five key tenets of crisis communications: be prompt, compassionate, honest, informative and interactive (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 6). Again, these seem like common sense – but companies all too often overlook the basics when attempting to quell a crisis in the media. Being prompt will help to ensure that the rumor mill is limited; by avoiding the issue and putting off a response, minds will only wander and reporters will try harder to dig deeper to get to the bottom, which will only hurt the organization’s ability to control its message in the long run (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 6). Being compassionate and honest allows the public to see that an organization is truly sorry; it humanizes the institution and immediately targets the emotions of stakeholders, setting the foundation to rebuild trust. Finally, the response must be both informative and interactive – facts and figures will answer questions and set the record straight, while two-way communication with stakeholders fosters cooperation and loyalty on their part, rather than further resistance (Bernstein & Bonafede, 2011, ch. 6).

The Page Philosophy

Renowned public affairs guru Arthur W. Page established seven principles to guide communicators in the corporate realm. His philosophy was based on truth, character, interactive communication and ultimately serving the public interest (Arthur W. Page Society):

“The successful corporation, Page believed, must shape its character in concert with the nation’s. It must operate in the public interest, manage for the long run and make customer satisfaction its primary goal. He described the dynamic this way: “Real success, both for big business and the public, lies in large enterprise conducting itself in the public interest and in such a way that the public will give it sufficient freedom to serve effectively”” (Arthur W. Page Society).

The guiding principles underlying this philosophy include:

- Tell the truth.
 - Prove it with action.
 - Listen to the customer.
 - Manage for tomorrow.
 - Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it.
 - Realize a company’s true character is expressed by its people.
 - Remain calm, patient and good-humored.
- (Arthur W. Page Society).

The simplicity and clarity of these concepts is striking, and they could not be more relevant to crisis management. The idea of honesty tied to action, listening to stakeholders and being proactive in “managing for tomorrow” are all key elements of effective crisis response, and they stem from the people behind the operation. Especially in times of crisis, the way an organization deals with the media and the public will help determine its reception in the court of public opinion.

As this thesis will soon explore, Penn State’s response to the Jerry Sandusky child sex abuse scandal succeeded in putting some of these ideas to practice, while failing to carry out others. The plainly disturbing and inexcusable nature of the scandal made it a difficult one to manage. Denying the allegations or trying to let the issue pass could only go so far, as the case was not only integrity-based but also competency-based once the years of administrative cover-

ups were exposed. Perhaps if Penn State crisis communicators had used tools like the value compass and issued a clear apology and explanation of a plan of action from the beginning, they could have avoided some of the widespread public distrust that resulted from the scandal.

Chapter 2: The Penn State Football Scandal

Penn State Football: Historical Context

For Pennsylvania State University, the football program is king. State College, PA, known affectionately by Penn State faithful as Happy Valley, sits in the middle of the state, a rural area with little acclaim for anything besides education and the product of its intense and unceasing pride: college football. The second-largest stadium in the country, Beaver Stadium seats 106,572 fans and PSU consistently places in the top five FBS schools for average home attendance (Penn State Athletics, 2013). As of 2013, the Penn State football team held a 257-65 on-field record at home, though all wins from 1998-2011 were later vacated due to the NCAA's sanctions regarding the scandal that is the subject of this thesis (Penn State Athletics, 2013). Students are rabid fans, as over 21,000 student season tickets are sold each year (Penn State Athletics, 2013). They often camp out for multiple days to get the best seats in "Nittanyville," a makeshift tent city outside the stadium, and have been dubbed one of, if not *the* most passionate student sections in the nation by the college football media (Penn State Athletics, 2013). The rich history of the program spans over 125 years, featuring such striking statistics as 723 wins, 27 bowl victories, 97 first-team All-Americans, 51 academic All-Americans and an impressive 91 percent NCAA graduation rate (Penn State Athletics, 2013).

Joe Paterno, known by the public as JoePa, was hired as an assistant coach by Penn State in 1950, rising to the position of head coach in 1966 – one where he remained until 2011, amassing an unprecedented record of 409-136-3 in 46 seasons (Penn State Athletics, 2013). Paterno, the winningest coach in major college football history by a long shot, was the beloved face of the Penn State program during his tenure there and continues to be idolatized by Penn State students and alumni despite his controversial role in allegedly allowing the heinous acts of his longtime assistant and friend, Jerry Sandusky, to go on over a 14-year span (Weinreb, 2011).

PSU alumnus Michael Weinreb described growing up in State College, becoming engrained in the Penn State football culture and worshipping Paterno as a hero figure, placing him on a pedestal that has now been cast in shadow:

“Sometimes we were guilty of regarding him as more deity than man, as if he presided over us in mythological stand-up form. He was as much our own conscience as he was a football coach, and we made that pact and imbued him with that sort of power because we believed he would wield it more responsibly than any of us ever could. Maybe that was naïve, but we came of age in a place known as Happy Valley and naïveté was part of the package, and now that word isn’t in our dictionaries anymore” (2011).

He was well-known not only for his on-field feats, but also his determination to carry out what he called “the Grand Experiment” – building a football program of superior quality on and off the field, marrying big-time athletics with academics (Weinreb, 2011). He held players to high standards, but to further champion this cause Paterno raised millions of dollars for Penn State and his name remains on the Paterno Library at the University Park campus (Weinreb, 2011). LA Times writer and PSU alumnus Shawn Hubler, who grew up in central Pennsylvania and graduated from Penn State, describes her family’s worship-like obsession with Paterno as one stemming from his sense of class:

“The coach never bragged. He never gloated. He didn’t put up with undignified antics. He made sure his players got a good education, like his, and were set for a life beyond football...Penn State was the way to success, and, we felt, there was no greater success than to end up like Paterno – good family, good work ethic, accomplishment in something of value. And Penn State football was very much ‘of value.’ It could lift a young man up and out from a place like ours to a finer life and destination, and turn him into the kind of person we wanted to be” (2011).

He passed away from lung cancer in 2012, just two months after his firing amid the drama of the unfolding Sandusky scandal. Still, Paterno’s legacy proved to be alive and well in November 2011, when Penn State students rioted in the streets of State College over the news of his firing (Schweber, 2011). Thousands of them chanted Paterno’s name, screamed the famous “We are Penn State” chant, tore down lamp posts and street signs, threw rocks, overturned a

television news van and stood on cars to protest the firing, resulting in police control via protective riot gear and pepper spray (Schweber, 2011). Some felt the media were unfairly blaming the scandal on Paterno, resulting in his downfall; others were angry at the board of trustees' decision to terminate Paterno's contract; and still others were simply heartbroken, in tears at the whole situation (Schweber, 2011). Clearly, the passion of the Penn State student body for their beloved football coach – resorting to violence and aggression at his removal – shows the immense status of the football program in the daily life of State College, PA. Sportswriter and Penn State alumnus Michael Weinreb describes the “culture of unrest” so prevalent on the Penn State campus, one that was omnipresent both before and after the scandal broke:

“We do this a lot at Penn State, gather in spontaneous groups to celebrate football victories or party weekends or nothing at all, and even when I was involved with it, I couldn't explain why. Back before they figured out ways to collapse goalposts, we rushed the field to take them down ourselves. In 1990, when Craig Fayak kicked the game-winning field goal, a group of students leapt the fences of Beaver Stadium, tore down the goalposts, and deposited them on the front lawn of Joe Paterno's house, all of which wouldn't seem so odd except that the game was played in South Bend, 500 miles away. In 1993, when the Phillies won the National League pennant, we clogged Beaver Canyon, jumped around for a while, and then went home. When bin Laden was killed, thousands of students clogged the streets, chanted “U-S-A!,” and then went away.

Again, I can't say definitively why we do these things, and I am deeply ashamed by the violence that occurred in the wee hours of Thursday morning, with the world peering in on our town as it never had before. Maybe it's the omnipresence of alcohol, and maybe it's a party culture that's been honed over the course of several decades, and maybe it's just the sense that we're young and invulnerable and want to express ourselves in some way on a campus that keeps growing and growing, at a university that's so unbelievably big that it can easily swallow your identity.

Then again, there are a lot of things about Penn State that I can't explain today” (2011).

To set the stage for an analysis of the handling of unprecedented scandal, one must understand that the cult-like obsession with football so omnipresent in State College is arguably unlike any devotion to sport on any other campus. Penn State football – a program nicknamed “Linebacker U” for its tradition of success at the position – is described by New York Times sportswriter George Vecsey as “the central fact of life in the state:” “When a large male newborn is on

display in the hospital nursery, people make loving jokes about sending him out to JoePa to play linebacker. Not so funny at the moment, is it?” (Vecsey, 2011). Vecsey believes the idea of ‘football as king’ – placing a football program at the penthouse of a university’s priorities – serves as an institutional impetus for immorality and skewed value systems, and one that was clearly exemplified at Penn State through this scandal (Vecsey, 2011). He points out the danger of the traditional “old-boy system” in place at Penn State for so many years, one that caused the university managed to ignore the fact that children’s lives were being destroyed in order to continue on with life as always, furthering the progress and elevating the status of the already championship-caliber football program (Vecsey, 2011). Michael Weinreb waxes poetic about the power of college football to unite people – a power that became so colossal at Penn State that it swallowed academics, administration and ethics in a time of unthinkable transgression, resulting in major strife and scandal:

“But this is why college football evokes such extreme emotion, and this is why schools work so damn hard and often take ethical shortcuts to forge themselves into football powers: If they are successful, then the game serves as the lifelong bond between alums and townspeople and the university, thereby guaranteeing the institution’s self-preservation through donations and season-ticket sales and infusions into the local economy. It is a crass calculus, when you put it that way, which is why there will always be skeptics and there will always be those of us for whom college football is (other than our own families) the purest emotional attachment of our adulthood, and there will always be some of us who bound between those two poles” (2011).

Clearly, the context in which the 2011 Penn State child sex abuse scandal took place was an emotionally charged one with a laundry list of stakeholders: powerful administrators and coaches, passionate students, loyal alumni and fans, dedicated players, skeptical media and ultimately, helpless victims. The details of what happened are so horrible as to be almost inconceivable, and the way in which the university dealt with the aftermath is a topic of

controversy that will later be explored. First, the situation – the scandal – itself will be described and assessed.

Details of the Scandal

In March 2011, Sara Ganim of The Patriot-News in Harrisburg, PA reported that former Penn State defensive line coach Jerry Sandusky was being investigated by a grand jury regarding allegations of indecently assaulting a teenage boy (Ganim, 2011). The allegation was made by a 15-year-old boy in 2009, and at the time the article was published, the grand jury was in the midst of hearing testimony for over 18 months (Ganim, 2011). Ganim wrote that PSU head football coach Joe Paterno, along with athletic director Tim Curley and then-former university vice president Gary Schultz had testified (2011). The allegation was especially disturbing given Sandusky's extensive access to young boys through the charity he ran. The Second Mile was founded in 1977 as outreach for thousands of underprivileged youths in Pennsylvania through summer and year-round camps (Ganim, 2011). The allegation in question stemmed from a high school in Pennsylvania where Sandusky served as volunteer football coach, and the incident of inappropriate touching – having happened several times over a four-year period – was reported by the boy's mother to the principal and football coach (Ganim, 2011). The then-superintendent of Keystone Central School District, John DiNunzio, called the entire ordeal a "hush-hush situation," saying he never heard a word back from police after passing on the report (Ganim, 2011). Sandusky quit as a volunteer high school coach in 2009, saying he wanted to devote more time to his charity – from which he then soon retired, less than two years later (Ganim, 2011). The rumor mill began to churn around this time, and soon word came out about a May 1998 allegation of "inappropriate contact against Sandusky by another boy" (Ganim, 2011). The then-12-year-old claimed Sandusky showered with him in the locker room of the Lasch Building on

Penn State's campus and inappropriately touched him while there (Ganim, 2011). At the point of Ganim's article being published, no charges had been filed against Sandusky, as the Pennsylvania grand jury served as a way for prosecutors to further probe for and investigate "potential crimes," allowing them the power to compel witness testimony through subpoenas and do so in secret, without media scrutiny (Ganim, 2011). A key note regarding this investigation, in terms of internal inquiry within the Penn State administration, is that a trustee who saw Ganim's article asked about the investigation at a board meeting; then-president Graham Spanier responded by "briefing trustees...but [did] not raise the issue of its impact on the university," and the board "[took] no action to investigate further" (Sablich, Fessenden, & McLean, 2011). Penn State then declined to comment when questioned about the investigation (ESPN.com news services, 2011). In a January 2012 press conference, then-chairwoman of the board, Karen Peetz, acknowledged the essence of deception conveyed to the board by Spanier in this short briefing; she claims the board did not truly become aware of the situation until the same time the public did, in November 2011 (Progress, 2012).

On November 5, 2011, Jerry Sandusky was arrested and subsequently released on \$100,000 bail after an arraignment on 40 criminal counts related to child molestation (ESPN.com news services, 2011). This same day, PSU athletic director Tim Curley and university vice president Gary Schultz were charged with perjury and "failure to report what they knew of the allegations" (Sablich et al., 2011). This launched Penn State into a flurry of media coverage and ensuing public outrage, as Sandusky's arrest was the spark that began a firestorm of controversy and scandal, not only at the heinous acts he committed, but also on the administration that supposedly knew about it and failed to stop it. Within two days of the arrest, Penn State announced Curley and Schultz were stepping down, and a day later, public pressure to oust

Paterno and Spanier grew nationwide, causing Penn State to “abruptly [cancel] Paterno’s regular weekly news conference” (ESPN.com news services, 2011). On November 9, 2011, Joe Paterno publicly announced his impending retirement at the conclusion of the football season (Sablich et al., 2011). This announcement was made without board approval, and later that day the board announced the firing of both Paterno and PSU President Graham Spanier (Sablich et al., 2011). It was soon announced that defensive coordinator Tom Bradley would take over as interim head coach and provost Rodney Erickson would serve as interim PSU president (ESPN.com news services, 2011). Sandusky’s first extended public comments since his arrest came on November 14, 2011, in a Bob Costas interview televised nationally – he claimed innocence, saying he was not a pedophile, but did say “I shouldn’t have showered with those kids” (Sablich et al., 2011).

More than seven months after this scandal broke, Sandusky was convicted of the sexual abuse of 10 boys spanning 15 years and found guilty on 45 of 48 counts (Sablich, et al., 2011). This resulted in a sentence of 30-60 years in prison (CNN Library, 2014). On July 12, 2012, the Freeh Report – an extensive document detailing the results of an independent investigation of the scandal – was published by Louis J. Freeh, former federal judge and F.B.I. director (Sablich et al., 2011). This report was damning not only for Sandusky, but for “four of the most powerful people at The Pennsylvania State University,” Spanier, Schultz, Curley and Paterno as it claimed they “failed to protect against a child sexual predator harming children for over a decade” and “concealed Sandusky’s activities from the Board of Trustees, the University community and authorities” (Freeh, Sporkin, & Sullivan, LLP, 2012). The Freeh Report detailed the “total and consistent disregard by the most senior leaders at Penn State for the safety and welfare of Sandusky’s child victims,” highlighting failures on the part of administrators, coaches and the board of trustees itself to adequately investigate and handle the alleged abuse by

Sandusky, thereby allowing the abuse to continue and more victims to be affected (Freeh et al., 2012). While the abuse itself is inherently horrific, what further shocked the public were the administrative lapses committed by those who witnessed or were aware of Sandusky showering with young boys on Penn State's campus. One key figure in this controversy exposed by Freeh was a Penn State assistant coach and former graduate assistant and player, Michael McQueary. In February 2001, McQueary witnessed Sandusky forcibly having sex with a young boy in the showers of the football facility at Penn State; he reported the incident the following day to Joe Paterno, who told him, "you did what you had to do. It's my job now to figure out what we want to do" (Freeh et al., 2012). Following McQueary's reporting of the incident, Paterno, Spanier, Schultz (who was in charge of the campus police force) and Curley – in various meetings and email correspondence – debated what action to take, ultimately deciding against notifying state child welfare authorities and only telling officials from Sandusky's charity, The Second Mile (Becker, 2012). They agreed to make an effort to encourage Sandusky to seek professional help, prevent him from bringing children to campus (Becker, 2012). Jo Becker of the New York Times reported:

"Not reporting the accusation to the authorities, the men determined, was the more "humane" way to deal with Sandusky, according to the e-mails...Lawyers for Curley and Schultz, contacted about the e-mails, issued a statement saying in part: "For Curley, Schultz, Spanier and Paterno, the responsible and 'humane' thing to do" in 2001 "was to carefully and responsibly assess the best way to handle vague but troubling allegations. Faced with tough situations, good people try to do their best to make the right decisions.'" (2012).

Blame has been a major element of public reactions to this entire scandal – many placed it on McQueary for not using his physical presence as a 6'5 former football player to simply stop the abuse from happening as he witnessed it (Van Natta Jr., 2014). Regardless of how the chain of command was utilized in this case – from McQueary reporting it to Paterno to Paterno reporting

it to Curley, to Spanier, et cetera – it is clear that there were major lapses in administrative judgment in play which ultimately caused more boys to continue being sexually abused for nearly ten years.

Though Paterno was not charged with perjury as his colleagues were, he received intense public scrutiny for what the board of trustees described as “his failure to act more aggressively after learning of the attack,” calling it “a failure of leadership” (Becker, 2012). Still, public controversy and debate wages on regarding his actions, as he was not directly involved in the decision to not notify child welfare authorities; rather, he reported the incident to his higher-ups and let their decisions play out (Becker, 2012). His role as the face of Penn State and arguably the most powerful man on campus, however, makes his lack of action notable, and due to what he knew he is obviously pinpointed as a contributor to the cover-up efforts of university officials.

Ten days after the Freeh Report was published and six months after Paterno’s passing, the infamous sculpture of Joe Paterno that stood outside of Beaver Stadium was taken down, as interim university president Rodney Erickson said leaving it there would be a “recurring wound to the multitude of individuals across the nation and beyond who have been the victims of child abuse” (Sablich et al., 2011). A statement from the Paterno family objected to the statue’s removal, saying it “does not serve the victims of Jerry Sandusky’s horrible crimes or help heal the Penn State community...the only way to help the victims is to uncover the full truth” (Van Natta Jr., 2012). ESPN reporter Don Van Natta Jr. reported PSU president Rodney Erickson made the decision to take down the statue but keep Paterno’s name on the university library:

"I now believe that, contrary to its original intention, Coach Paterno's statue has become a source of division and an obstacle to healing in our university and beyond," Erickson said in his 592-word statement. "For that reason, I have decided that it is in the best interest of our university and public safety to remove the statue and store it in a secure location...I fully realize my decision will not be popular in some Penn State circles, but I am certain it is the right and principled decision...The library remains a tribute to Joe and Sue

Paterno's commitment to Penn State's student body and academic success and it highlights the positive impacts Coach Paterno had on the university. Thus I feel strongly that the library's name should remain unchanged"" (Van Natta Jr., 2012)

This was a key move by the university in publicly acknowledging the damning claims of the Freeh Report through their actions and taking down a major symbol of Paterno as hero. Feelings were mixed regarding the statue, as some students guarded the statue from vandals and protested when workers moved to take it down, yet dissenters flew a small plane across campus for three days with a banner claiming "Take the statue down or we will" (Van Natta Jr., 2012). Further, some alumni were angered at Penn State's lack of advance notice before taking the statue down, saying "they promised openness but said nothing about the decision until just before the removal work began" (Van Natta Jr., 2012).

The football program itself endured heavy penalties from the National Collegiate Athletic Association in the wake of the scandal. On July 23, 2012, The NCAA announced its sanctions and penalties related to the Sandusky scandal: a \$60 million fine, four-year postseason ban for football, extensive scholarship reductions for four years and the vacation of PSU football's wins from 1998-2011 (Sablich et al., 2011). Current football players (at the time) were given the opportunity to transfer without penalty or the NCAA mandatory year to sit out, until August 2013 (Penn State Athletics, 2013).

Situation Analysis (SWOT)

Strengths:

- Penn State has an enormous alumni base and a major network of loyal fans
- PSU Football has proved to be a strong brand with which many identify
- Coverage by many national media outlets – in news and sports – allows for the messages PSU disseminates to be heard loud and clear
- Joe Paterno has been long recognized as a trusted leader with high moral standards
- Jerry Sandusky, the root of the crisis, retired in 1999 and is not a current PSU employee

Weaknesses:

- The media and the general public are understandably horrified and immediately skeptical of messages coming from PSU
- Shifting the blame will only put the university in a worse position in the public eye than the one it has already assumed
- Child sex abuse is a serious and touchy subject that strikes a very negative chord
- The football program as a whole looks to be at fault, even if the crisis is rooted in the actions of one man
- PSU must show empathy toward the victims, apologizing for the serious transgressions of its employees while simultaneously maintaining its image as a trusted and respected institution – a delicate and difficult balance to achieve
- At the time the news is breaking, PSU is in the middle of football season and must not get swept up in the game instead of responding to the crisis at hand

Opportunities:

- Due to Sandusky's status as a *former* employee, PSU may attempt to distance itself from the scandal
- PSU can use its position in the crisis to begin correcting its wrongs, through raising charitable donations and awareness for charities that work to prevent and treat child sex abuse
- With the careful and deliberate crafting of crisis response messages, PSU can make amends with its loyal base of followers before they get so far away as to detach themselves
- Perhaps this scandal can serve as a wakeup call for college football programs and big-time college athletics in general to be more transparent and ethical

Threats:

- National media attention puts the program in the spotlight and under the microscope, so immediate and effective crisis response is crucial before it gets any further out of hand
- Sandusky has denied wrongdoing, and the scope of the abuse has not yet been officially determined
- The rumor mill churns as head coach Joe Paterno, athletic director Tim Curley and university president Graham Spanier have been accused of playing a role in years of administrative cover-ups, making it difficult to isolate the root of the crisis and handle it accordingly
- Legal action from the victims and sanctions from the NCAA are likely looming, and anything PSU says could be used against the school later on

Chapter 3: The Aftermath

Communications Audit

Penn State's initial response to the breaking news of Jerry Sandusky's arrest came in the form of a three-paragraph statement released by President Graham Spanier on November 5, 2011:

"Statement from President Spanier

The allegations about a former coach are troubling, and it is appropriate that they be investigated thoroughly. Protecting children requires the utmost vigilance.

With regard to the other presentments, I wish to say that Tim Curley and Gary Schultz have my unconditional support. I have known and worked daily with Tim and Gary for more than 16 years. I have complete confidence in how they have handled the allegations about a former University employee.

Tim Curley and Gary Schultz operate at the highest levels of honesty, integrity and compassion. I am confident the record will show that these charges are groundless and that they conducted themselves professionally and appropriately.

Graham Spanier" (Progress, 2011).

While this statement acknowledges the crisis, it places strong trust in the officials who were later ousted for their roles in covering up Sandusky's actions; perhaps Spanier acted with haste in professing his public support of them so soon, while the crisis was still beginning to unfold. Further, the statement fails to address the real victims of the alleged acts – the victims. Rather, PSU and Spanier chose to focus on the role of its current employees in the scandal, essentially missing the point.

From this point on, Penn State continued to use its university news site to post statements in response to the unfolding Sandusky crisis – first, the initial statement from President Spanier, followed by an announcement of Curley's and Schultz's stepping down and soon after, another brief statement from the board of trustees announcing the firing of both Spanier and Paterno and their immediate interim replacements, Dr. Rodney Erickson and Coach Tom Bradley (Figures

2.1 and 2.2). Within a week of the Sandusky arrest, the Penn State Board of Trustees announced the establishment of a special committee, headed by Merck CEO Kenneth Frazier and Pennsylvania secretary of education Ronald Tomalis, to investigate, “with the help of outside counsel...who’s responsible and what changes to Penn State policy can be made surrounding the Sandusky case” (Gallagher & Orso, 2011). This announcement was made after Curley and Schultz announced their resignations, and interim PSU president Rodney Erickson announced his “full confidence in the committee to investigate ‘how responsibilities to these children failed’” (Gallagher & Orso, 2011).

Penn State hesitated to make itself openly available to the media, as it abruptly canceled Joe Paterno’s weekly press conference the week that the scandal broke, citing legal reasons and refusing to reschedule it (Collier, 2011).

On November 10, 2011, newly appointed Penn State president Rodney Erickson published a statement expressing his anger and sadness at the situation, acknowledging Penn State’s storied tradition as an institution and asking the community to join him in moving forward (Figure 2.3) This statement was accompanied by a YouTube video shared on Penn State’s website through its YouTube account. In the video, Erickson proclaims Penn State’s commitment to its core values and its determination to rebuild the “trust, honor and pride that have endured for generations” there (Penn State University YouTube Account, 2011). Three of these 30-second spots were disseminated over an 11-day span, featuring Erickson standing in a university building reading brief statements thanking the Penn State community for their support and promising his intention to be a strong leader and move forward from the tragic and unacceptable situation at hand (Penn State University YouTube Account, 2011). He also released another statement on November 11, 2011, detailing five promises to the Penn State community

which he would carry out in response to the Sandusky crisis, including doing the right thing, leading by example, acting with transparency, showing respect to victims and providing any and all resources needed to support the investigation of the matter (Figure 2.4). The statement is concise and straightforward, noting Erickson's commitment to do the right thing through revising PSU policies, encouraging open dialogue and providing timely updates on the Sandusky investigation (Figure 2.4). Still, these were words promising action, and the action took time to be implemented. Erickson's first interactions with the media and exposure to the public eye were straightforward and consistent, but the administration was criticized for repeatedly "declining to make him available for an interview" and the board was questioned for failing to implement a full nationwide search for a new president, choosing instead to promote Erickson without looking beyond Penn State (Frantz, 2011). Erickson, former provost at PSU, is described as a man of vision and practicality – not a flashy politician or infallible leader, but a confident decision-maker committed to doing things the right way and protecting PSU's academic brand (Frantz, 2011).

In terms of social media, transparency was questionable at best and Penn State chose to err on the side of caution by staying mostly silent. In early December, the Penn State Football YouTube account posted a "Together We Stand" video set to uplifting emotional music with clips of the candlelight vigil organized by students for child abuse victims, students and student-athletes in the classroom and on the field, successful alumni out in the world and fans at the stadium; this pointed out the program's achievements and teamwork, fostering a sense of unity and togetherness in the face of crisis (Penn State Football YouTube Account, 2011). There was no direct mention of the scandal in the video, but the reasonable viewer could deduce its purpose as a tool to unite the community. Other than this, though, Penn State's social media presence was

virtually nonexistent – the university chose to never directly acknowledge the Sandusky situation on social media despite the rampant buzzing on many social media platforms from students, fans, alumni and the general public (Agnes, 2012). Certain moments were highlighted on social media platforms by sports media personalities and the public, such as when Penn State and Ohio State players met in a moment of prayer prior to their game in honor of the victims of child abuse (Figure 4.1). Small but thoughtful choices like this showed sparks of awareness and initiative on the part of Penn State to turn the awful situation and crisis into an opportunity for improvement. Still, Penn State missed many opportunities by choosing not to enter the social media conversation itself. Social media crisis manager and consultant Melissa Agnes believes the loyal fan base and active community surrounding Penn State are major assets and “brand advocates” that could have helped ease the struggle Penn State endured in the face of so much public scrutiny (Agnes, 2012). She suggests the university could have made an effort to promptly address the scandal and have a say in controlling its message, thereby separating the institution from the scandal in many ways; rather than being referred to as the “Penn State Scandal” it could have become known solely as the “Paterno Scandal” or “The Curley and Schultz cover-up” (Agnes, 2012). Rather than do this, Penn State chose to stay silent and further implicate itself in the public eye without a steady flow of consistent and open messaging (Agnes, 2012). Agnes blames this lack of transparent and interactive communication for the continued aftermath of the scandal:

“With their core audience screaming their want for open communication, the University would have been wise to open up that portal. To develop a core and consistent message, as well as a strategy and guidelines for responding, would have helped them position their brand as caring, responsive, open and, most importantly, separate from the scandal. The actions of a few individuals should not put the entire organization at risk, though they allowed it to have these kinds of repercussions. It was the public who named the scandal the “Penn State Crisis”, and this was a product of poor crisis communications” (Agnes, 2012).

Penn State was clearly tight-lipped with its social media presence in the face of crisis, as administrators instructed staff to stay silent and prohibited them from posting anything directly related to the scandal (Agnes, 2012). Former PSU athletics marketing intern Kelly Burns told a Huffington Post blogger: “Our Facebook and @PennStateFball Twitter lit up but that was difficult because initially we were not allowed to post...we were not permitted to post anything about the scandal, nor were any other people working for the University. We were told to wait until Old Main [Penn State’s administrative center on campus which includes the university president’s office] made a statement before we could say anything. So we went completely dark” (Scott, 2012). Burns claims there was “no crisis management plan in place whatsoever” at Penn State when the scandal broke, and claims that even months later in mid-2012, Penn State athletics staff was updating the account infrequently with bland press release-style information, leaving fan engagement “minimal as a result” (Scott, 2012).

Until the death of Joe Paterno, PSU was essentially silent; the football-specific Facebook page posted a blue ribbon image promoting a student-run initiative for fans to wear blue to the upcoming football game for child abuse awareness and prevention, but other than that did not address the scandal (Figure 3.1). At the news of Paterno’s passing, the university’s Facebook page posted a memorial photo with part of a cautionary statement from President Rodney Erickson announcing Penn State’s intention to consider the best way to honor Paterno for his longtime service at the university (Figure 3.2). The statement was released on January 22, 2012 from the president and board of trustees:

“We grieve for the loss of Joe Paterno, a great man who made us a greater university. His dedication to ensuring his players were successful both on the field and in life is legendary and his commitment to education is unmatched in college football. His life, work and generosity will be remembered always.

The University plans to honor him for his many contributions and to remember his remarkable life and legacy. We are all deeply saddened. We are considering appropriate ways to honor the great life and legacy of Joe Paterno. The University's Department of Intercollegiate Athletics is consulting with members of the Penn State community on the nature and timing of the gathering” (Progress, 2012).

The statement, released again through Penn State’s news service online, acknowledged Paterno’s contributions while staying cautiously hands-off regarding memorial service plans. This was obviously a delicate subject, as Paterno’s role in the scandal was still unclear and fans’ loyalty to him spanned different levels. Still, his death, which occurred several months after the scandal broke, was a chance for Penn State to become more active on social media, which it did through multiple channels – including a YouTube video compiling footage of his funeral procession in State College. However, the lack of social media presence sooner was a questionable way to handle public interaction online in the face of crisis. And later in January 2012, Penn State held a memorial service for Paterno at which his family and former players spoke, showing again the staying power of his legacy despite the uncertainty surrounding it at the time.

Upon the release of the Freeh Report in summer 2012, PSU issued a statement accepting its “sad and sobering” findings and detailing its intent to act forward in a better way:

“The focus of all of our actions going forward will be on driving a culture of honesty, integrity, responsible leadership and accountability at all levels and within all units of our institution” (Progress, 2012).

With this statement, PSU also acknowledged several of the school’s initiatives to prevent and treat child abuse while addressing Sandusky’s victims by funding counseling, listening and “taking affirmative steps to address the harm they have suffered” (Progress, 2012). The statement further detailed the Board of Trustees’ change in structure, announcing the creation of new committees within the Board and how its “oversight role” would serve to foster transparency and open communication within the PSU community and beyond (Progress, 2012).

At the conclusion of the statement, PSU announced its intent to use Freeh's findings not only to correct the university's wrongs, but also to take a proactive step in the right direction:

“With the release of the Freeh Report we are beginning to correct our failures, promote healing and build a stronger tomorrow for Penn State. We are continuing the process of addressing the most painful chapter in the University's history so that we can heal and move forward” (Progress, 2012).

Prior to this release of the Freeh Report, on February 13, 2012, Penn State launched a new “openness” website as a platform for publicly addressing the events associated with Jerry Sandusky's arrest (Stoller, 2012). This was perhaps the best step the university took in the wake of the crisis, as it allowed for a communication platform and showed that it took the issue seriously and was devoting resources to dealing with it directly, all the while sharing its initiatives with the public. The website included information on fees paid by the university to attorneys, consultants and communications firms, highlighting the fact that “no student tuition, donations or state funding will be used to cover costs associated with the case” (Stoller, 2012). Interestingly, the university reportedly paid over 2 million dollars for the internal investigation and crisis communication services (Stoller, 2012). To announce the website's launch, PSU issued a press release stating its role as a resource to foster a culture of openness and serve as “a reminder of the commitment to open communication to the fullest extent possible,” in the words of President Erickson (Stoller, 2012). Since then, the website has been changed to feature “Progress” – progress.psu.edu – to serve as both an archive for past communications and a place for the Penn State community to stay updated on PSU's progress moving forward from scandal and staying active with current initiatives to promote awareness and prevention of child abuse while distancing Penn State from the heinous actions of its former employees (Progress, 2014). The website's introduction explains its purpose:

“There is no doubt that the Penn State community continues to face challenging times. As we move forward and address the crisis, we are committed to supporting the prevention and treatment of child abuse, while also focusing on the future of this great university to ensure Penn State’s standing as a world-class academic and research institution” (Progress, 2014).

It features specific sections entitled “Addressing the Crisis,” and “Supporting the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse,” with bullet points explaining such initiatives as the creation of the Special Investigations Task Force, the Freeh Investigation, the hiring of a full-time compliance officer and the development of an annual professional training programs for employees to spot and report child abuse (Progress, 2014). Further, the website includes links to policy changes including a revision of the protocols for supervising and treating minors in University-related programs and the Board of Trustees’ updated governance structure that focuses on more openness and accessibility (Progress, 2014). To directly target the problem of child abuse, the university announced a partnership with Praesidium Inc. – “the national leader in abuse risk management” – to arrange and pay for counseling services for the victims of Sandusky’s abuse (Progress, 2014). Penn State’s over 2.6 million dollar donation to abuse prevention included the funding of a new Center for the Protection of Children at Penn State Hershey Children’s Hospital, a partnership with and program funding for the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the opening of a 24/7 sexual assault and relationship violence hotline for all Penn State campuses (Progress, 2014). Penn State also hosted a two-day Child Sexual Abuse Conference in October 2012 to foster awareness and education in a public setting; this conference has since become an annual staple in the Penn State Community, as it held a “Conference on Child Protection and Well-Being” in September 2013 followed by “The Role of Parenting and Family Processes in Child Maltreatment and Intervention” Conference in May 2014 (Progress, 2014). Finally, Penn State established its own

“Network for Child Protection and Well-Being” which included the hiring of 12 new faculty members over the course of three years. This initiative is described as a multi-faceted approach to the widespread problem of child abuse:

“The goal of this initiative is to advance knowledge, practice, education and outreach to combat child abuse. To date, the University has hired six faculty researchers and has searches in progress for six others. This cluster hire is designed to bring faculty members from different disciplines together to address the problem of child maltreatment in new ways. Significant areas of research include: human development, bio-behavioral health, public policy, criminology, psychology, medicine, education, nursing, human services, and prevention science” (Progress, 2014).

The Progress website is a culmination of Penn State’s crisis communication efforts in relation to the Jerry Sandusky scandal, and it contains a helpful FAQ section, fact sheets regarding Penn State’s NCAA Sanctions and the Freeh Report, along with multiple financial reports, legal briefs and contact information for interested media personnel (Progress, 2014). Its archive of past press releases and news stories shows awareness and transparency, but perhaps its most proactive measure is its “Plan for Continuous Improvement” written by PSU communications employee Reidar Jensen (Progress, 2014). This plan details an action plan for each described improvement to be made, along with information on its current status and the official responsible for its carryout (Jensen, 2014). In regards to communication, the prescribed goal was to “consider appropriate communications vehicles to provide information on change initiatives to internal and external stakeholders” (Jensen, 2014). To do this, PSU initiated a national search and hired a new Vice President for Strategic Communications, Lawrence Lokman; Lokman and the PSU communications staff launched “Penn State Today,” a daily internal newsletter to better communicate within the Penn State community in July 2014 (Jensen, 2014). Further, the crisis communications plan developed in the wake of the scandal was updated according to the structural changes of the Board of Trustees (Jensen, 2014). While this plan was

not made public, it is clear that the institution realized the need for a change and took the initiative to make it, and it continues to be aware and make changes several years after the initial crisis occurred. This shows a better understanding of crisis communications and promotes the idea of putting action to words – Penn State is being transparent in sharing its plans with the public, and updating stakeholders on progress as it happens. Other key elements of the plan include creating committees to come up with a statement of core values and integrate these values into decision-making within the university (Jensen, 2014). To do this, a “University Ethics Committee” was created and a new “2015-2019 University Strategic Plan” has been developed, with special sections addressing the “promotion of integrity and ethical behavior” (Jensen, 2014). Still further elements of the plan include the hiring of an Ethics Specialist to work to create a “Statement of Ethical Conduct” for the university, along with the hiring of an “Athletics Integrity Officer” to permanently occupy a seat at the table of university leadership and make “regular reports to the Committee on Legal and Compliance” (Jensen, 2014). This officer’s role includes reporting to the Athletics Integrity Council and the Board of Trustees, ensuring compliance with the Big Ten’s “Statement on Institutional Standards” and working to head the integration of academic support and athletics through a new “Academic Support Center for student-athletes” (Jensen, 2014). The plan further details goals and action plans for amended procedures in governance, human resources, information systems, legal/risk/compliance/audit administration, policy review, safety and security, training and development and youth programs (Jensen, 2014). This plan is an active list that is updated over time, as its initiatives are ongoing and its public presence serves as “a tool to analyze how these various changes relate to each other, and to other University systems and operations, in order to enhance successful implementation and mitigate risk” (Jensen, 2014). This clear-cut layout of Penn State’s

approach to dealing with the aftermath of the Sandusky scandal and setting off on a new foot as an ethical, aware and transparent institution sets Penn State apart not only in communications, but in administrative structure and overall cohesiveness as a large and powerful establishment in academia, athletics and its surrounding community.

Administrative Response

When top administrators fail to remain transparent with the board of trustees and take “decisive action” to address a developing crisis, especially to the level that PSU administrators orchestrated a decade-long cover-up, the only real solution is to terminate them (Cooper, 2012). Clearly, at Penn State the football program had become a sort of “sacred cow” that abided by its own, isolated standards, with Paterno – the football coach – occupying the position as arguably the most powerful administrator on campus (Cooper, 2012). When the Freeh Report made it clear that Paterno and other athletic officials were involved in covering up the scandal, the best move for Penn State was to cut the tumors and appoint new leaders to implement a culture change and fresh, transparent start. Thus, the replacement of Spanier, Curley, Schultz and Paterno was a relatively swift and respectable decision that ultimately allowed Penn State to begin distancing itself from the transgressions of its former employees and get on track to rebuilding its reputation as a top university and football program. Still, the way Paterno’s firing was carried out was another point of criticism for Penn State’s response to the crisis, as it was done by late-night telephone call on November 9 – nearly a week after the scandal surfaced – and resulted in students rioting in State College, resulting in even more negative publicity for the school (Fahn, 2012). After a short press conference with the board where little elaboration was provided, media, students and supporters bombarded the Paterno residence until Joe and his wife came outside to make a short, informal statement acknowledging his firing and thanking the

Penn State community for their support while reassuring them that they would get through this (Ryan, 2011). Two members of the board spoke during a press conference announcing the personnel changes, explaining that while the decision to fire Paterno was difficult, it was necessary for the long-term interest of PSU; while getting peppered with questions regarding Spanier and Paterno's oustings, the board-members were hesitant to speak due to the ongoing investigation, as they did not want to speculate (Ryan, 2011). Although the press conference provided the media with an opportunity for information and some transparency on the part of the board, there was still a sense of a lapse between the public and the administration as they failed to act in a completely transparent manner or at least with a more well-trained spokesperson prepared to deliver more than just the initial statement (Ryan, 2011). An ongoing circumstance that made it difficult for Penn State to aptly craft an in-depth and effective crisis response was the lack of sure knowledge on the part of the board and all Penn State officials at the time the crisis broke, as the issue at hand involved so much internal turmoil and the investigation took months to be completed and culminate in a full report.

Some students organized and held a candlelight vigil on November 11 for the victims of Sandusky's abuse, raising awareness and money for abuse survivors and calling for Spanier's ousting (Penn State News, 2011 and Wolverton, 2011). Penn State covered the event by posting a photo gallery on its news website, but the fact this event was the first public outpouring of support for victims by the university community – and it was organized by students, not on the part of administrators – shows yet again how Penn State was slow to react while the crisis was still unfolding.

Penn State turned over a new leaf on January 6, 2012, when they named Bill O'Brien, former offensive coordinator for the NFL's New England Patriots, the 15th head football coach of

PSU (Penn State Athletics, 2013). After leading the team to an 8-4 record in the face of intense public scrutiny, O'Brien was named Big Ten Coach of the Year and National Coach of the Year (Penn State Athletics, 2013). O'Brien's response to the NCAA's hard-hitting sanctions announced in July 2012 was textbook coach speak in the wake of administrative upheaval: "I knew when I accepted the position that there would be tough times ahead...but I am committed for the long term to Penn State and our student-athletes" (The Associated Press, 2012).

Penn State seniors Michael Mauti and Michael Zordich pledged their commitment to the school and uniting the 2012 team before the start of training camp (Penn State Athletics, 2012). Their impassioned statement at their team meeting, filmed and released as a tweet, garnered public attention, especially in light of the news that the NCAA measures taken against the university allowed any then-current PSU players to transfer to another university and immediately play (Rohan, 2012). Having the support of the current team and players – the ones who were feeling the direct effects of the scandal, despite their lack of direct involvement – helped to unite the university and the entire Penn State community, providing them a current situation to rally around and move forward from the transgressions of the past.

O'Brien stayed at Penn State through the 2013 football season, after which he left to accept a job as the head coach of the NFL's Houston Texans. His replacement, former Vanderbilt head coach James Franklin, was hired in January 2014. PSU issued a statement detailing the reasons for its hiring choice, highlighting his accolades at Vanderbilt and history as a Pennsylvania native (Nelson, 2014). By this point, Penn State as a whole was emerging from the shadows of the scandal. Despite the still prevalent echoes of the NCAA sanctions at play, the replacement of top leadership, combined with initiatives related to preventing the wrongs of the past from happening again allowed the school and football program to move on from the dark

days of 2011 and 2012. Even small tweaks like adding blue ribbons to Penn State's helmets to show support for child abuse victims and the ceasing of playing Neil Diamond's 'Sweet Caroline' – which was written about a 12-year old girl and features such lyrics as "how can I hurt when holding you . . . warm touchin' warm, reaching out, touching me, touching you" – showed Penn State's awareness of the scandal and its intent to do better and move on (Simon, 2012). Penn State officials publicly said the choice to stop playing the song at games was not due to its questionable lyrics, though the court of public opinion accepted the move as part of a general shift and reaction to relieve the stain of the Sandusky scandal from the school and its football program (Simon, 2012). The policies outlined in "The Plan for Continuous Improvement" in response to the recommendations established by the Freeh Report included ceasing public access to the football facilities in State College, showing sincere concern and attention to public safety and risk prevention (Simon, 2012).

PSU's interim athletic director since Tim Curley's stepping down, David Joyner, was officially hired as director of athletics in January 2013. Joyner released textbook comments on the NCAA's sanctions: "We accept the penalties of the NCAA for the failure of leadership that occurred on our campus...we are deeply disappointed that some of our leaders could have turned a blind eye to such abuse, and agree that culture of Penn State must change" (Flounders, 2012). This statement flowed with the consistent messaging of the university and its administration post-scandal, briefly acknowledging the situation but always focusing on moving forward.

Interestingly, applications to Penn State's flagship campus in State College went up 2 percent in the 2011-12 cycle, during the height of the scandal (Ruiz, 2011). Though some applicants called to withdraw their applications or ask about the scandal, admissions executive Anne Rohrbach said prospective students who came to campus for visits in the wake of the

scandal were “almost empathetic” and did not wish to discuss the story of the scandal (Ruiz, 2011). Perhaps outsiders just beginning the process of becoming Penn State stakeholders were willing to temporarily ignore the situation due to its lack of development at that point.

Obviously, as time went on, PSU as an institution became more entangled with the controversy, so the fact that Sandusky was no longer employed there did not matter, as so many others were involved in the cover-up – Paterno, Spanier, Curley, Schultz and McQueary.

Overall, the administrative impetus of Penn State post-scandal was to move forward, effect change and carry on the strong tradition and community of the university and its storied football program while remaining mindful and empathetic of the victims of the horrific Sandusky crisis. As time progressed, the institution succeeded at doing this, but its initial response to the issue was questionable and it could not truly move on until after the administrative and policy changes were put in place and the culture of the administration was changed. During this process, Penn State could have remained more transparent to the public through the use of social media and doing more than simply releasing cookie cutter press releases. The statements did the job, but the rebuilding of public trust and improving the general attitude of the scrutinizing public toward the university took longer than it should have.

The final chapter of this thesis will further examine the actions Penn State took, looking at what it could have done better and how it is currently faring, three years later.

Chapter 4: Evaluation

Crosschecking PSU's Actions with Best Practices

Penn State suffered from a lack of preparation when this crisis broke, but it was a lack that was completely avoidable – having a contingency plan in place is always important, but when administrators are involved in a blatant cover-up, one would imagine they would be even more wary of the potential of a communications crisis breaking out (Fahn, 2012). The first misstep in its handling of the situation came in 1998 after Sandusky was initially accused of improper behavior with children and again in 2001 after McQueary witnessed the behavior – failing to proactively prepare for these issues to come to the surface, choosing to instead sweep them under the rug, was the underpinning of this entire scandal (Fahn, 2012). At these points, Spanier and his fellow administrators should have taken further action to ensure Sandusky was properly reported, investigated and then dealt the proper punishment, all the while working together to develop a consistent plan on how to deal with the situation in the face of the media (Fahn, 2012). During this entire series of missteps, the board of trustees was kept in the dark while President Spanier took it upon himself to be the sole executor of the “communications strategy” – if it could even be called as such (Fahn, 2012).

Ultimately, Penn State's crisis management tactics improved over time. But people defined the school's handling of the situation by its initial reaction, which was misguided from the start, as Spanier's statement focused on his support for Curley and Schultz rather than expressing true compassion for the victims (Wereschagin, 2012). He failed the “grace-under-fire” test as the initial spokesperson for Penn State's crisis response.

PSU's statements were few and far-between in the initial crisis period, which came across as reactive silence and inaction rather than the transparent, proactive messaging that could have helped alleviate the public's outcry at the crisis. The administrative changes they made

were key, but not immediate, so people perceived the reaction as slow and full of misplaced trust. As crisis management professional Terry Fahn stated, “although under normal circumstances, taking a week for a decision might be prudent, in Penn State’s case the silence was deafening” (2012).

Penn State trustee Ron Tomalis, in an interview with Time Magazine, succinctly summarizes the board’s action timeline to fire Spanier and Paterno:

“One of the misperceptions is about the slowness of the board to react to this situation after it broke. You have to remember that it was four days, 96 hours, from the time that that report was made public until Spanier and Paterno were both relieved of their responsibilities. Considering the size and scope of that institution, that's quite aggressive action in a short period of time” (Rotherham & Rawe, 2011).

Tomalis makes a solid point, but it is still inexcusable that Penn State had no set plan of action in place to more smoothly communicate and transition the change in leadership. The climate of this entire situation inherently complicates it, as an administrative cover-up muddles the lines of ‘who knows what’ and obviously creates opportunities for ethical sidesteps. But to think no one prepared for the possibility of this scandal one day coming to light is difficult to accept from a crisis communications best practice point-of-view. In terms of the board itself’s response over the course of this situation, press conferences sometimes featured more than five people speaking, including the then-chairwoman of the board, the governor of Pennsylvania, the PSU president and others (Progress, 2012). While splitting up the decision-making pressures among a diverse body of leaders is good administrative practice, perhaps by sticking to one spokesperson, Penn State could have put more of a face to its addressing of and moving forward from the Sandusky scandal. While President Erickson is an obvious choice as the figurehead for the university, Karen Peetz, the chairwoman of the board, showed eloquence and poise under media

fire and likely would have made a solid spokeswoman had she been given that sole responsibility.

Public information began to trickle out over time, but the lack of two-way interaction from the start put a bad taste in the mouths of the public, and thus immediate reaction to the idea of Penn State's PR efforts is generally negative. Perhaps it took until PSU hired Ketchum for \$360,000 and hired multiple lawyers for help with legal and crisis communications consulting that the university was able to improve its efforts; still, that lack of crisis communication plan in place made for extreme chaos and further reputational damage than the initial crisis created (Wereschagin, 2012). The news of this crisis broke abruptly and almost immediately entered the "unfolding drama" stage, as details were not yet known and much uncertainty was prevalent for all involved. The "blame game" stage – usually reserved for later on in the crisis process – also began early, as people chose to point fingers at Paterno, Spanier, the university as a whole, the board and others instead of just at Sandusky. Finally, the fallout stage – which requires taking action – was poorly dealt with at first, as it took time for Penn State to react and take action. However, it is hard to say whether this was avoidable, as administrators themselves were so entangled in the scandal and personnel changes at the senior level are no trivial matter.

Penn State's primary way of responding to this crisis came in the form of press releases and news articles on its website. These statements released periodically from the time the news broke through the Freeh report's release and beyond show relatively consistent messaging – as time went on, Penn State's words showed more awareness and compassion to the victims while promising to take action and move forward. Still, a true and sincere apology was never expressed, and consistent messaging through press releases allowed for short, surface-level messaging. Perhaps by having a more interactive presence online or organizing open discussion

forums, Penn State could have rebuilt public trust sooner after the scandal. This lack of compassion mixed with an inherent lack of confidence, as the administration was involved with the scandal itself, showed a failure on Penn State's part to engage with the "3 C's." Competence was in question from the start, and quickly became even more questionable at the dismissal of top administrators. The replacements Penn State chose proved to be competent with time, and communication became more compassionate as statements began incorporating lines directly recognizing Sandusky's victims; confidence has come with time, but three years later, there is still a sense of extreme caution and need for extra compliance measures and ethics several years later.

Stern Associates blogger and PSU alumna Ashley Glowinski believes the combination of a delayed response – due to Penn State's initial silence and tight-lipped statement – along with former president Spanier's "misdirected" statement placing extreme trust in his colleagues rather than focusing on the victims of Sandusky's crimes contributed to Penn State's worsening reputation crisis (Glowinski, 2012). Further, she believes the lack of immediate action on the part of Penn State to support child abuse prevention and treatment efforts showed a lack of support and clarity on behalf of university administrators (Glowinski, 2012). Still, I agree with Glowinski that Penn State's eventual action to take down the Paterno statue and "gracefully [accept] the harsh penalties" from the NCAA showed progress, if delayed and long awaited at that (Glowinski, 2012). Essentially, Penn State was able to rebuild public trust and maintain its image as a well-respected institution and storied football program in spite of the scandal, but it did so over a more drawn-out timespan than it could have.

PRSA blogger Rosanna Fiske hits the nail on the head, saying this crisis was not simply a PR issue, but a management and leadership issue (Fiske, 2011). Still, after the chain of failure

that occurred in the Penn State administration, the communications staff had an opportunity to bridge the gap between the institution and its publics, which they initially failed to do. Fiske agrees with media relations professional John R. Brooks in his assessment of Penn State's actions; he insists that after authorities were contacted – which is obviously the first imperative step in dealing with the aftermath of actions that broke the law – Penn State owed the public a timely acknowledgement of the situation, including an apology to the victims and a direct address of the issue at hand: “It would not have changed the eventual outcome for the people involved, but it would have avoided the loud silence of official comment that seemed to exist” (Fiske, 2011).

TCU government affairs professional Larry Lauer wrote in a blog post about the PSU crisis that unfolding athletics crises are often easy to criticize, but difficult to deal with at the time as details emerge and complicate (Lauer, 2011). He states that traditional crisis management techniques can be difficult to implement when communications professionals do not immediately know all the facts. This clearly played a role in the months between the Sandusky arrest and the Freeh report, which is perhaps why PSU stayed silent in a cautionary attempt to refrain from jumping to any conclusions. Lauer suggests that communications officials follow a crisis management plan as much as possible, but learn to deal with new facts as they come by clarifying message points and staying consistent across multiple media platforms, being clear, concise and transparent in telling the new stories (Lauer, 2011).

A key turning point for Penn State was the decision to implement an independent investigation by outside counsel, which culminated in the Freeh Report. Former FBI director Louis Freeh was chosen to head the investigation and given “broad leeway to investigate anyone at the school, from department staffers to trustees themselves” (Matheson, 2012). Penn State –

specifically, the board of trustees' established special committee – announced Freeh's planned investigation and subsequent "impartial and comprehensive assessment" on November 21, 2011, several weeks after the scandal broke in the press (Progress, 2011). By choosing someone without affiliation to the university itself, PSU gained credibility and started to turn public opinion around regarding its handling of the Sandusky allegations. The board's initiative to create a taskforce for an investigation and ultimately hire Freeh was a successful and much-needed one; still, the time it took for these decisions to play out was what left Penn State in a bruised position in the public eye (Fahn, 2012). Even the administrative decisions to oust Paterno, Spanier and Schultz took time and were done in a less-than-graceful way, as Paterno ended up being fired by phone (Fahn, 2012).

A crucial determinant in Penn State's reaction to this crisis was the sheer lack of certainty and concrete understanding of the facts of the situation – Fahn argues that the lack of clarity surrounding the entire situation made it hard for Penn State officials to distinctly identify the "audiences and objectives it needed to target":

"Penn State's approach to the Sandusky crisis was the antithesis of good crisis management. Instead of ascertaining and analyzing the facts of the situation before addressing the media, Penn State responded to media inquiries by offering its "unconditional support" to two individuals who were indicted for lying about the sexual abuse of minors. On top of this untenable position, because of their lack of knowledge about the facts of the matter, Penn State representatives were completely unable to clearly explain the circumstances surrounding the Grand Jury investigation" (Fahn, 2012).

Fahn makes an excellent point regarding the misunderstanding – on the part of Penn State – not only of the facts, but also the level of media scrutiny that the Sandusky scandal would attract and the differing needs and opinions of its various publics: "...while Penn State attempted to address the demands of law enforcement and the media, it completely failed in its attempts to communicate with Penn State students, alumni, faculty and staff" (2012). Fahn points out the

messy firing of Joe Paterno – via telephone, late at night – as a classic example of Penn State’s missteps (2012). This move was a controversial one, and made in response to extensive public and media outcry; still, it angered many in the Penn State community, and its poorly (if at all) planned and purely “reactionary” execution resulted in “even more unneeded bad press” with students rioting in protest (Fahn, 2012).

If Penn State were to abide by the aforementioned “valued compass” in crafting its crisis response message dissemination, it would be forced to identify its various stakeholders, realize the aim it wants to take as an organization, determine standards to live up to and target stakeholder emotions accordingly. If Penn State chose to be honest, straightforward and respectful of the victims, crafting a response that was realistic, detailed and trustworthy, it could have aimed to immediately remedy fans’ anger, confusion and distrust.

In sum, Penn State’s initial reaction to the Sandusky crisis was slow and vague, and failed to properly focus itself on the victims, instead taking an internal focus. While the reaction improved over time with more frequent updates and some incorporation of videos, opportunities for increased media coverage and much-needed personnel and policy-changing decisions, Penn State missed out on the opportunity to use social media to its advantage in creating an interactive atmosphere in which it could communicate with the public, instead opting for silence on that front which came across as ignorance and further covering up efforts. The decision to hire Freeh and the steps taken to create an action plan post-Freeh Report showed savvy decision-making on the part of the PSU board of trustees, university and athletic department officials; these actions embraced truth, action, and managing for tomorrow – all key Page Principles. Its lack of prompt and effective crisis management strategy at the start of the crisis put Penn State in a poor position and left a bad taste in the mouths of the public. But as time progressed and it received expert

crisis advising, the institution was able to rebound from its initial missteps and begin rebuilding public trust. The “We Are” climate of Penn State – one of extreme loyalty and unfailing allegiance – was tested, but ultimately proved to bounce back. Penn State football was knocked down by this scandal, but not entirely out.

PSU’S Current Pulse

In 2013, Penn State, along with the other Big Ten schools, gave donations in the amount of what would have been its bowl revenues to several child-focused causes including the Children’s Advocacy Center (Progress, 2013). The Board of Trustees authorized PSU to arrange for legal settlements in the multiple suits against it by Sandusky’s victims – another move that recognized past wrongdoing and attempted to move forward toward amends and improvement while showing respect (Progress, 2013). Also in 2013, PSU named its first director of University ethics and compliance – a former FBI special agent – to oversee all compliance matters (Progress, 2013). In its continued carrying out of the Plan for Continuous Improvement, Penn State has shown considerable progress in administrative restructuring and governance.

Since the time of the silent shadow in which Penn State social media platforms resided in late 2011 and early 2012, there has been an increased presence and seemingly more transparent effort to interact with fans. While there was still no mention of the scandal itself, the general feel of the football team’s Twitter and Facebook accounts is one that is open and up-to-date. The team also created an Instagram account prior to the 2013 season, which it updates regularly with images of the team on and off the field – many times interacting with fans and participating in community service outreach (Figure 5.1). Initiatives like the “It’s On Us” campaign to stop sexual assault continue to play a role in the Penn State football culture, with video spots played at football games and players’ participation being highlighted on Instagram (Figure 5.2). Further,

Penn State is not shying away from addressing its ugly scars as it has a research guide and librarian devoted to sharing information on the scandal, including news stories, legal information, student and faculty perspectives and university-issued statements. The overview on the Penn State Library website states:

“The Sandusky sex abuse scandal has turned Penn State upside down and many students are struggling to make sense of recent events.

This research guide is intended to assist students and other researchers investigating various aspects of the scandal for writing assignments or for their own edification. It is not intended to be comprehensive or be an endorsement for any one voice, but to be a springboard to find more information” (Penn State Sandusky Scandal Library Research Guide).

While the repercussions of the Sandusky scandal will never truly disappear, they have certainly begun to fade. Just over three years since news of the scandal surfaced, the university continues to deal with sanctions and legal issues related to the terrible acts committed by its former employee. But to blame current leaders at the institution for the misguided actions of its past would be unfair – an idea that the public has begun to grasp now. Despite its early struggles to communicate in the face of scandal, which were directly related to its questionable administrative setup and lack of ethical guidance, PSU has made a considerable effort toward recovering from the effects of Jerry Sandusky.

Penn State’s *Progress* website continues to be updated periodically even today, and the fruits of the initiatives set forth in response to the recommendations made in the Freeh Report are visible. Quarterly reports of the athletics integrity monitor, updated remarks from board meetings and additions to the Plan for Continuous Improvement are all viewable, along with many other resources for the public’s viewing and use (Progress, 2014). Penn State continues to play an active role in raising awareness and funds for victims of child sexual abuse, and its annual conferences shed light on the subject while maintaining its image as an aware and socially active

institution who is not running away from its past – though it has essentially moved on. President Erickson retired in May 2014 and was replaced by Eric J. Barron – former Florida State president – after completion of a national search. The PSU Board of Trustees recognized Erickson’s “meritorious service” as president with a medal of recognition and the naming of the Rodney A. Erickson Food Science Building (Progress, 2014). PSU athletic director Dave Joyner announced his retirement in July 2014; his replacement, former UC-Berkeley AD Sandy Barbour, was hired soon after. These administrators were recognized for their courageous efforts in the difficult era of post-2011 Penn State, and now the once-removed class of administration has taken on the responsibility to continue Penn State’s efforts to move forward.

In terms of football, the Penn State team has seen success despite the distractions of administrative upheaval and media scrutiny resulting from the scandal. After finishing the scandal season 9-4 (with those wins vacated due to NCAA sanctions), the team finished 8-4 and 7-5 under Bill O’Brien in 2012 and 2013, respectively. At the time of this thesis’ writing, PSU is 5-4 and on the cusp of being bowl-eligible in 2014. Bill O’Brien’s leadership, and now James Franklin’s strong coaching style, have proven to be successful first steps in moving forward from the Paterno era.

At the beginning of the fall 2014 football season, the NCAA announced that it would lift some of Penn State’s sanctions related to the Sandusky scandal due to “remarkable progress” shown by PSU over the course of the year (Moyer, 2014). While it still must pay the \$60 million fine and 111 of Paterno’s wins will remain vacated, Penn State will be eligible for postseason bowl play starting in 2014 and will have all scholarships available starting in 2015 (Moyer, 2014). This decision was met with mixed reaction from the public, as many felt it was a copout on the part of the NCAA, and still others felt the sanctions were too harsh to begin with since the

current team and administrators – the ones enduring the consequences of the penalties – are not the ones who committed the transgressions from which they resulted.

Recommendations and Keys to Handling Future Crises in College Football

Penn State's football program endured an unprecedented crisis in the wake of the Jerry Sandusky scandal. Crises in college athletics are not uncommon, but one of this proportion was hard for anyone to imagine. By putting its change hat on and setting forth with new administration – on the team, in the athletic department and on a university-level as a whole – Penn State was able to move out of Sandusky and his colleagues' shadows toward a new era and fresh start for Penn State, rather than sinking back to “normal” – whatever normal even was. The climate at Penn State is one so uniquely passionate and far-reaching that few college football programs could rival it in terms of fan loyalty and rabidity. If a crisis of this magnitude were to happen at a big-time, perhaps SEC school, it would be wise to use Penn State's actions as a preliminary benchmark and basis from which to learn.

Having a preemptive risk management and crisis communication plan – including a designated spokesperson – in place is paramount to overcoming the hiccups of an unfolding scandal as smoothly as possible (Tsikoudakis, 2012). While crises are sometimes inevitable, having a set policy to deal with potential misconduct and purchasing risk management insurance are ways that universities can be proactive and prepared for future problems (Tsikoudakis, 2012). Employing a full-time compliance staff is a major asset to these programs, and ensuring that the athletic compliance staff works with senior administration of the university itself is key. I agree with PSU Professor Michael Bérubé in his assessment of PSU's administrative issues, as early on he recommended the creation of a faculty ethics committee for the administration to consult with in dealing with allegations and issues of a controversial nature, especially in athletics

(Bérubé, 2011). President Rodney Erickson's initially promised "new era of transparency" and appointment of a direct report ethics officer was certainly a start; still, Bérubé argues that "it is entirely conceivable that when confronted by an issue with powerful repercussions for university business (whether with regard to athletics or to drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale), an ethics officer will offer advice that tries to protect the university – and its leadership – from damaging public scrutiny" (Bérubé, 2011). Thus, by leaning on its faculty rather than continuing the tradition of the old boys' club of a closed-loop administration, Penn State can garner trust among its own while creating a more beneficial relationship with outside stakeholders and the public. Penn State essentially did just this in its creation of a new ethics committee and its hiring of an ethics specialist and an athletics integrity officer (Progress, 2014).

With the Sandusky abuse scandal in hindsight, it is clear that being proactive as managers and communicators could be the difference-maker in preventing and assuaging ethical scandals and crises. Universities, especially large ones entwined in big-time football culture, would benefit from using what Bérubé calls the principle of "shared governance" – essentially a system of checks and balances – by utilizing resources beyond the scope of the athletic department. Spreading the power among multiple departments would foster a culture of transparency and open communication channels, allowing issues to be addressed as they arise rather than swept under the rug by the few hands in control.

In terms of social media, there is a delicate balance to be struck between being open, transparent and interactive and being overzealous and hasty with responses before they are truly thought through. Social media and crisis guru Melissa Agnes suggests addressing a situation immediately when it gets exposed; using real-time communication from the get-go fosters a sense of openness and honesty, allowing for a consistent flow of messages and garnering a sense

of appreciation from the public despite the difficult position the school – Penn State, in this case – is in (Agnes, 2012). She further suggests creating a social media crisis team of monitors and communicators to continually check the pulse of online discussions and allow for 24/7 interactive communication to answer questions and respond to comments (Agnes, 2012). Finally, Agnes suggests developing a clear and consistent message – not simply staying silent – and communicating it coherently across all platforms, through a spokesperson and Penn State staff (Agnes, 2012). Even updating social media platforms with links and images tied directly to official statements and press conferences would be a way to maintain some control of the program’s message. While engaging in such open communication as Twitter chats might not be feasible in the unstable legal climate of a major crisis, keeping social media platforms alive and active from the moment the crisis emerges in the public eye is a way to begin building trust and showing transparency to the public.

Karen Freberg, strategic communications professor at the University of Louisville, suggests that after acknowledging its plans to change the leadership culture and continuing to engage its publics in a transparent manner through social media platforms, Penn State could have “[taken] initiative to make serious changes in the athletic world to move forward,” perhaps by creating an alliance of schools or promoting a program for the NCAA to train staffers and create awareness of ethical issues in the collegiate athletics realm (Fiske, 2011).

In a general sense, the ‘football as king’ mentality is clearly a dangerous one that allows for the growth of ignorance and blindness on college campuses. PSU professor Charles R. Garoian states that “the incontrovertible, passive acceptance of football, and its monopolization of presumed positivity at Penn State, created a furtive environment where the sexual abuses could occur” (2012). He further elaborates that the mere “fear of losing control and fear of losing

power constitute an admixture for corruption and calamity” (Garoian, 2012). This must be kept in the forefront of the minds of not only compliance officials, but athletic, academic and general administrators at universities around the country. Teams have the potential to unite campus communities in a passionate and exciting way, but allowing football to ‘drive the bus’ fosters a misdirected sense of prioritization that can lead to ethical sidesteps.

While fostering a set of strong and ethical values is easy to advise with the benefit of hindsight, ensuring that it becomes a reality can sometimes be difficult. By using a system such as the “value compass” mentioned before – as trivial as it may seem – a football program can identify its main principles and the standards it hopes to meet with its crisis communication efforts from the get-go. In a situation with victims where internal publics are to blame, one must be careful to respect and acknowledge the damage done before placing too much trust in any one entity – be it an individual or body of people. Further, in consciously targeting the emotions of its audiences, programs would be wise to consider training and preparing a single spokesperson – or perhaps two to three, depending on the magnitude of the scandal – to put forth a consistent and coherent message. When an administrative body such as a board of trustees is involved, a school runs the risk of members going rogue; plus, clashing egos could make for miscommunications and disagreements that may fail to present messages from a united front. The spokesperson is a major choice, but one that should be consciously and tentatively planned as part of the crisis communication strategy ahead of time.

Finally, despite the dangers and risks associated with the corruption of big-time college football programs, these programs must realize the benefit of the asset that is their fiercely loyal and supportive publics – including fans, students and alumni. Rallying these supporters early on

in the crisis response efforts could make the difference between short-term scrutiny and long-term, widespread disdain.

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Appendix

The Value Compass

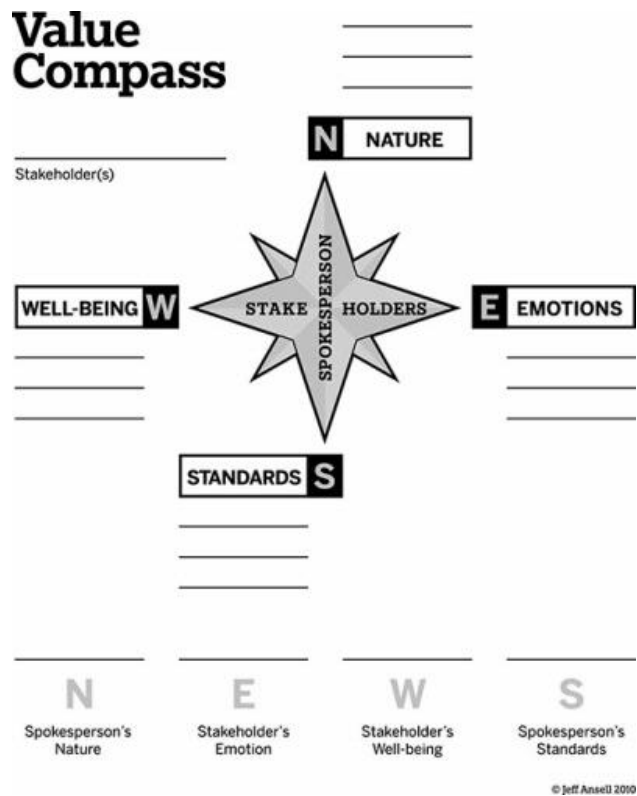


Figure 1.1 This chart demonstrates how to fill out the value compass in determining a plan of action for addressing the media in times of crisis (Ansell & Leeson, 2010).



celebrate the greatness of Penn State.

very way possible and

Graham Spanier

Last Updated November 16, 2011

Figure 2.1 This statement was released in response to the Board's decision to oust PSU President Graham Spanier. Spanier alludes to his innocence and attempts to set the stage for the Penn State community to move forward from the throes of crisis (Progress, 2011).



head football coach.

m

Last Updated December 13, 2011

Figure 2.2 This statement was released to announce the replacement of Dr. Graham Spanier (president) and Coach Joe Paterno, a controversial decision but one for which many in the court of public opinion were calling (Progress, 2011).

A message from Rodney Erickson | Penn State University

11/5/14, 8:37 PM



nger and sadness in this time, but always remember that your actions reflect on the entire Penn State community. Please set an example

t Updated November 16, 2011

Figure 2.3 This statement was released by new PSU President Rodney Erickson, acknowledging his role as interim president and calling upon the PSU community to follow his lead to move on while remaining aware of the importance of ethical and integral conduct (Progress, 2011).



ing. My door will always be open.

2. As I lead by example, I will expect no less of others.
 - I will ensure proper governance and oversight exists across the entire University, including Intercollegiate Athletics.
3. Penn State is committed to transparency to the fullest extent possible given the ongoing investigations.
 - I commit to providing meaningful and timely updates as frequently as needed.
 - I encourage dialogue with students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other members of the Penn State Community.
4. We will be respectful and sensitive to the victims and their families. We will seek appropriate ways to foster healing and raise broader awareness of the issue of sexual abuse.
5. My administration will provide whatever resources, access and information is needed to support the Special Committee's investigation. I pledge to take immediate action based on their findings.

Last Updated November 16, 2011

Figure 2.4 This statement was released by new PSU President Rodney Erickson, setting forth his five promises as a plan of action in response to the Sandusky crisis (Progress, 2011).



Penn State Football
November 11, 2011

A student-run initiative for tomorrow's game! Wear Blue.

The Blue Ribbon Campaign against child abuse began 22 years ago and is recognized across the country. In addition to being one of our own colors, blue represents the color of bruises that have too often been neglected. By wearing blue on Saturday, Penn State football fans are showing their support for the prevention of child abuse.

If you would like more information on child abuse prevention, please contact:
Prevent Child Abuse Pennsylvania
Phone: 484-446-3033
Email: info@PreventChildAbusePA.org
Website: <http://www.preventchildabusepa.org>

WEAR BLUE SATURDAY

Like · Comment · Share

1,509 456 535 Shares

Figure 3.1 This Facebook post from the Penn State Football page was essentially the only direct acknowledgement of anything involving the scandal.



Penn State

January 22, 2012

Joe Paterno's contributions to Penn State were enormous, and his dedication to education, college athletics and football was immeasurable. For those asking about plans for a University memorial service, President Erickson said, "We are considering appropriate ways to honor the great life and legacy of Joe Paterno. The University's Department of Intercollegiate Athletics is consulting with members of the Penn State community on the nature and timing of the gathering."



[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · [Share](#)

5,132 647 979 Shares

Figure 3.2 This Facebook post from the Penn State page mentions part of the statement made by President Erickson regarding university recognition and memorial of Joe Paterno after his passing. Until this post, there was ultimately no mention of anyone or any part of the scandal on the page.



AP

Figure 4.1 This AP photo shows Penn State and Ohio State players meeting on the field for a prayer for victims of child abuse in the wake of the Sandusky scandal (retrieved from <http://www.chicagonow.com/legends-leaders-ledger/2011/11/penn-state-tries-to-move-forward-badgers-in-control-michigan-state-is-on-a-boat/>).



PHOTO



pennstatefball

82w



31 likes

pennstatefball Practice No. 5 of the spring is happening now.

Figure 5.1 This is the first post from the Penn State Football Instagram page, made in spring 2013, shows a growing social media presence post-scandal.

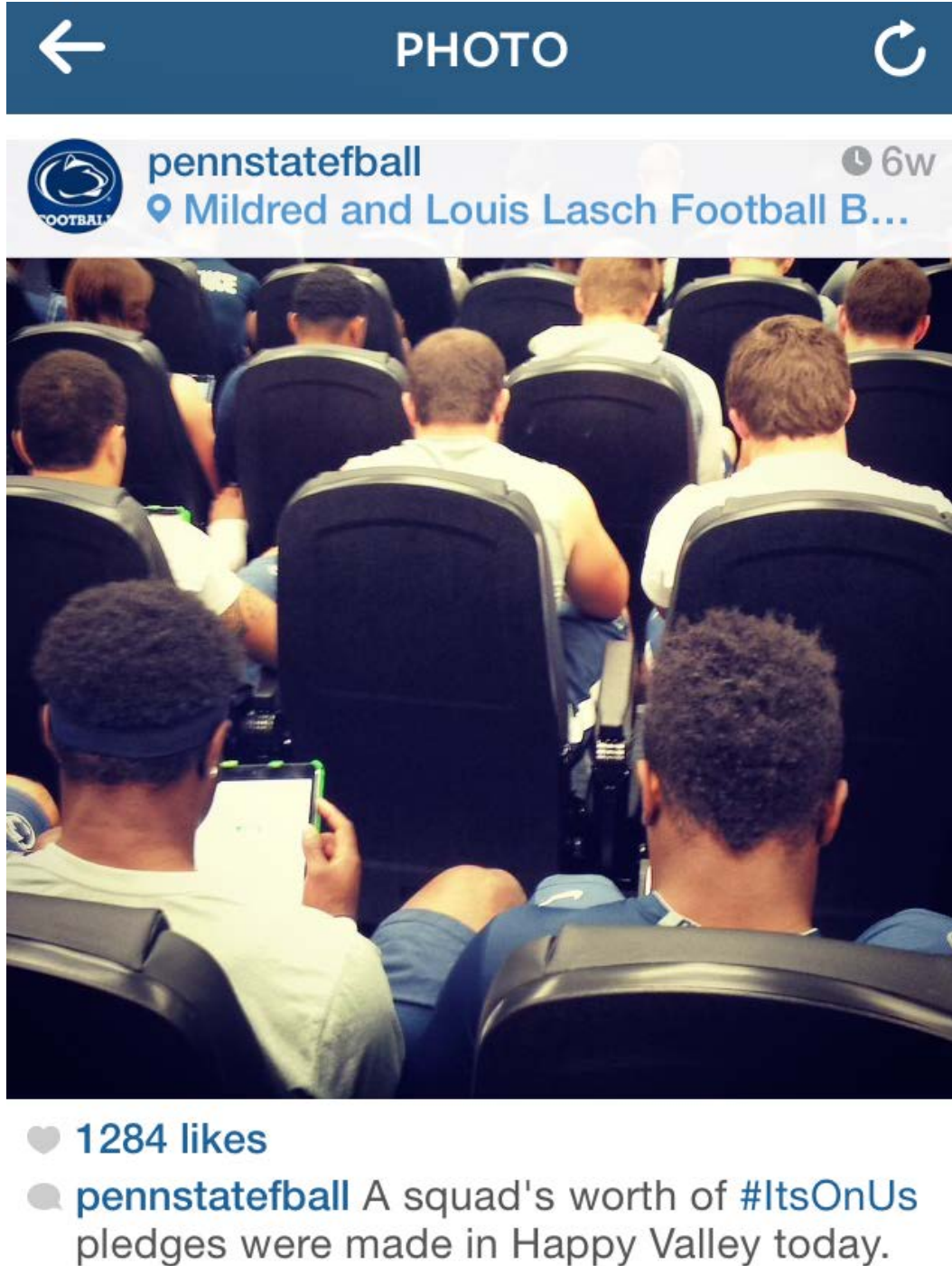


Figure 5.2 This is another post from the Penn State Football Instagram page, updated frequently, which shows the football team's participation in the "It's On Us" campaign to stop sexual assault.